ELL Myths and Facts

ELL students come from all walks of life and, while in our schools, they look to us to bolster their efforts at linguistic and cultural proficiency. To support them, we must set aside our assumptions and correct a few myths about ELL students and their classes.

**Myth:** An ELL lesson is similar to a mainstream language arts lesson.
**Fact:** Occasionally they’re similar, but ELL focuses on linguistics and language development rather than language arts.

**Myth:** An ELL teacher speaks the native language of every student.
**Fact:** An ELL class may contain as many languages as students. Being sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences is more important and practical than being multilingual.

**Myth:** A student who converses easily no longer needs ELL.
**Fact:** It takes 1–2 years to develop BICS (see left column). CALP takes 5–7 years because it is less concrete, requiring specialized vocabulary and critical-thinking skills.

**Myth:** Younger students learn English more quickly and easily than older students.
**Fact:** Acquisition time depends on prior knowledge and support. Older students can draw on underlying skills. Juan left school a few years before coming to the United States. Once here, he enrolled in the local high school. Juan was lucky because his new school had access to a bilingual program specifically geared toward students who are educationally deprived.

**Myth:** Use of the native language hinders English acquisition.
**Fact:** Continued development in the native language supports second language learning and literacy development. Concepts transfer.

With those myths dispelled, let me share a few more facts about ELL students. These facts come from the trenches—my ELL classrooms.

**ELL students can be any age.** My students ranged in age from 5–22 and came from at least 20 countries and four different religions. A few of these students were in special education, but most were part of the mainstream population.

**Knowledge of other languages varies among ELL students.** Some students are multilingual when they enter an ELL class. Many countries require students to learn another language, and English is a common choice. Though ELL students often arrive with prior exposure to English, their understanding may still be limited. Not every ELL program is adequate. Also, American English may confuse students who have studied British English.

Other students don’t know a word of English when they arrive and may not speak for months. Their brains are busy trying to absorb and process events, and they find it too difficult—and embarrassing—to produce English. Their silence is a normal response to their new environment. Therefore, teachers must wait until the student feels comfortable speaking, yet find ways to include nonspeakers in the lesson. They may write, draw, or gesture in response to questions. In other words, teachers must accept every attempt at communication.

**Families leave their countries for different reasons.** Teachers must be careful of making assumptions about students’ circumstances. Families immigrate to the United States for economic, political, professional, and religious reasons. Many hope to stay here while others travel between the United States and their native countries.

Jay’s father, for example, was a visiting professor who expected the entire family to return to Korea at the end of his assignment at a local university. Jay was happy to be in the United States, but some students are not. They miss the familiar world they left behind. Younger students may not be capable of understanding the reasons the family moved, and they often feel powerless and lost.

Occasionally, students come to the United States without their families. Christina came to live with her aunt and uncle because she wasn’t doing well at school in Hong Kong. Another student worked to earn enough money to bring
his family to the states one person at a time. For him, work was as important as school because both provided a means to improve his situation. 

**Family attitudes about school vary.** Just as reasons for being in this country differ, so do the attitudes of students and parents. The importance of school varies from one country or culture to the next. Some parents push their children to excel, while others view school as a legal necessity. Each culture is unique in its social attitudes and expectations. For example, ELL teachers may have students from families who prefer to arrange marriages for their children.

**Parent education levels also vary.** Undereducated parents may have difficulty participating in school events and projects. Ever’s father left school after the fourth grade. Ever could not rely on his dad’s help with homework assignments once he passed his father’s educational level. His father entered an adult education class in order to remedy their situation. A student’s success in school is affected by many factors, including family attitudes about education, the student’s age, and availability of programs geared toward involving the parents in the student’s education.

**Students born in the United States may not speak English.** Many ELL teachers will encounter students who were born in the United States but have had little exposure to English. These students usually live in isolated communities such as Indian reservations or in ethnic enclaves, like Spanish Harlem. Within these communities, the adults work, shop, socialize, and have access to media in their native language. Their children, however, must face the English-speaking world when they go to school.

Primed with these facts, teachers—whether ELL specific, general classroom, or student teachers—can prepare for the challenges of educating English language learners. As teachers gain knowledge of their students’ various cultures and create a welcoming classroom environment, the challenges will transform into joys.

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**Best Practices for Teachers of ELL Students**

1. Develop awareness of the individual circumstances of each student.
2. Know about the native languages and cultures of the students.
3. Employ (Gardner’s) seven intelligences in lesson plans.
4. Convey meaning with visuals and gestures; they are especially helpful to the nonspeaker.
5. Communicate needs and expectations for each student to each student’s family (and the ELL teacher, if different from the classroom teacher).
6. Use translated material and certified translators for parent communication whenever possible to guarantee accuracy. Students translating for their parents could create awkward situations.
7. Walk in their shoes. Attempt to function in a foreign language by accessing foreign media, attending language classes, or communicating in another language.
8. Allow students to learn from one another.

**Resources**

- [www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org). This official site of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc., a global education association, hosts advocacy alerts, resources for all levels of teachers and types of students, and online communities in its diverse menu.
- [http://bogglesworldesl.com](http://bogglesworldesl.com). At Lanternfish, you’ll find a plethora of lessons, games, and activities for ELLs from young children to adults.
- [www.cal.org/topics/ell](http://www.cal.org/topics/ell). The Center for Applied Linguistics offers various teaching tools and resources for pre-K–12 educators as well as teachers to adult ELLs.
- [www.culturegrams.com](http://www.culturegrams.com). Access learning resources in the social sciences, including culture, geography, and language learning.
- [www.eslcafe.com](http://www.eslcafe.com). Dave’s ESL café—for teachers and students around the world.

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